



## Your details

Mrs

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**Title**

**First name**

kaye

**Last name**

whitbread

## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

Blue Mountains Bushfire, December 21, 2019. I am a resident of Bell in the upper Blue Mountains. I am 71 years old. The Gosper's Mountain Fire to the north-west had been burning for over two months. A second fire started at Mt Victoria to the south on the Victoria Falls Road. We were in drought. We only have rainwater tanks for our water supply. A few residents has a bore. I DRANK BORE WATER FOR MONTHS RIGHT THROUGH THE WINTER. On Friday December 20, a TOTAL FIRE BAN day, I decided that I must evacuate. The situation was becoming critical. I have chronic health problems and am disabled. My neighbour assured me he would take care of my property. I have a bore, a generator and roof sprinklers which I had fitted after my husband passed away earlier in the year. It was never my intention to 'stay and defend'. I left home at approximately 1.00 pm with the intention of going to friends in Lithgow. The road to Mt. Victoria was closed, the Bell's Line of Road to Richmond was closed. I got as far as the corner of my street to find that Chifley

Road to Lithgow had just been closed due to fire. Effectively I was trapped, there was fire on all sides now. I panicked, I rang my family to say goodbye. I thought I may die. My brother calmed me and we discussed what to do. We decided to ring the Police. This I did and explained my situation and eventually I was escorted in to Lithgow by the Lithgow Police. I arrived finally at 11.00 pm. The fire impacted Bell at about lunchtime the next day. My home was spared. My preparations and my neighbour's assistance saved my home. I was safe. Unfortunately 6 out of 17 homes were destroyed but NO LIVES WERE LOST. I stayed in Lithgow for 3 nights. I wasn't allowed back through the road-block even though Sydney television crews were filming in our village. That's how I found that my neighbour's home had burnt to the ground. Why as a RFS member for 29 years, wasn't I allowed home but an untrained television crew can be in the fire zone?

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

The cause of this fire was a lack of hazard reduction over at least a 30 year period. The surrounding area is owned or managed by NSW National Parks, Blue Mountains Council, Lithgow Council, NSW Roads and Maritime Services, Sydney Trains and Electricity Supply Companies. Not one of these agencies has done anything to maintain their land hence we as residents are at risk. The 2013 fire did not have much impact here. There was no hazard reduction prior to or following the 2013 fire. There was no hazard reduction prior to the 2019 fire. WHEN A LOCAL BRIGADE CAPTAIN IDENTIFIES AN AREA THAT NEEDS HAZARD REDUCTION, HE NEEDS IT THEN, NOT YEARS DOWN THE TRACK WHEN THE SITUATION BECOMES TWICE AS BAD. THIS WHOLE LACK OF AGENCIES MAINTAINING THEIR LAND IS HAVING AN IMPACT ON RESIDENTS, HOMES AND OUTBUILDINGS BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT IS PUTTING AT RISK THE LIVES OF OUR VOLUNTEER FIRE FIGHTERS BECAUSE THE FIRES ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY LARGER AND HOTTER BECAUSE OF THE MASSIVE BUILT UP OF UNDERGROWTH. PEOPLE ARE DYING. VOLUNTEERS ARE DYING. THESE AGENCIES HAVE PAID EMPLOYEES THAT SHOULD BE DOING THIS WORK. Sydney Trains (formerly NSW Railways) had crews who every year in winter systematically burnt along both sides of the railway line here when my husband worked as the Bell Station Master a far back as 1974 but that doesn't happen now. THESE AGENCIES MUST MAINTAIN THEIR PROPERTIES. WE AS RESIDENTS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO DO THAT. SURELY THESE GOVERNMENT AND SEMI-GOVERNMENT BODIES MUST HAVE THAT RESPONSIBILITY TO US.

### 1.2 Preparation and planning

As residents, we started preparing our properties months before. We all knew that it was going to be a bad spring/summer period. I had started watering down and greening my property at the start of spring to offset ember attack. My neighbours also cleared and raked and watered. We as a community do the right thing. I have been an RFS member for 29 years. I held the position of Community Engagement Officer and I started running meetings in September 2019 to alert residents of the impending danger. We answered questions, issued literature, directed people to the website and apps, we offered property inspections and we identified vulnerable people in our community who could need assistance. The RFS AIDER Team is usually available to assist

elderly and infirm residents with property maintenance but their programme was cut short as they were required in the north of the state. The crew members are volunteer firefighters.

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### **1.3 Response to bushfires**

The response by the local RFS Brigade members was excellent as usual. The Blue Mountains Council eventually started helping us. It took two weeks after the fire to provide a garbage service. It was becoming a health hazard. People were digging holes and burying garbage. Council used the excuse that the road was closed. I was also told that the garbage trucks were needed elsewhere'. Obviously other towns were more important than here. There are actually three roads to travel from Katoomba to Bell. I threatened to call the NSW Department of Health if a service wasn't provided to us. Council felled a few trees but palmed off the work to either volunteers or Service NSW. The response by Service NSW was excellent. A little confused at first but that's understandable. Laing O'Rourke were not at all helpful, were disorganised and also totally unprofessional. Service NSW told me that assistance would be available so I applied to have trees removed that were impacting my roof. Over two months later, Laing O'Rourke rang me and said 'we don't do trees' and hung up on me. The following week, I was again called by Laing O'Rourke who had not checked my file so asked me what I needed and I was told the same thing. On checking, it was discovered that I had been phoned the week before. Total confusion. I've now paid thousands of dollars to have trees removed. Money that is hard to come by on a Disability Pension. I delayed having new tyres on my car as the trees were more important. It shouldn't be that way. My insurer, GIO doesn't cover trees unless they fall on the house. I have now received financial assistance from the Australian Government, Salvation Army and Red Cross so my financial situation has improved. The Federal Government also offered, and I accepted Counselling. To face a fire alone so soon after losing one's husband is so very distressing. My G.P. diagnosed PTSD as I presented to the Lithgow Hospital with chest pain which was diagnosed as being stress related.

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### **1.4 Any other matters**

The Military should have been brought in to perform hazard reduction prior to the fire. The issue of cross border agencies shouldn't matter when a Section 44 Declaration is in place. It is classed as a State of Emergency. I believe that this wasn't done as the agencies that I have previously mentioned, had they asked for assistance in this area, would have been shown up for their slack approach to hazard reduction. The excuse of a lack of training by Military Personnel will not stand up either. The use of equipment such as bulldozers to clear and widen fire trails and fire breaks prior to a fire, doesn't need any fire fighting training. The military has massive equipment both in size and in number and it's not as though we are currently fighting WW3. The military should be available. **BLAME MUST BE APPORTIONED TO THIS FIRE OTHERWISE IT WILL HAPPEN ALL OVER AGAIN.** Home and Contents insurance premium costs will be huge this year in fire affected areas and will continue to increase unless you as a commission do something to stop this and identify the parties responsible. The Bushfire Commissioner needs to step up and charge these agencies with taking care of their land. Volunteers cannot do it alone. His job is to prevent fire in the first instance. Thank you.

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## **Supporting documents or images**

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